

What the Eyes Give Back

—"A tear in the membrane

Allows the voices in

They wanna push you off the path

With their low-frequency wiring."

Thom Yorke - Hearing Damage

Est

The light woke me before the alarm. Not harshly—nothing in my apartment was harsh anymore. The curtains I'd bought three weeks ago filtered the morning sun into something soft, golden, the color of honey dissolving in warm water. I lay there for a moment, watching the way the light fell across my ceiling, creating patterns I'd never noticed when I was too consumed by my own pain to see anything outside myself.

The clock on my nightstand read 8:23 AM.

Saturday. Day two of Hong's exhibition. Day one of Lego's showcase. A full day of being present for people.

I didn't move immediately. That was new too—the ability to let a morning unfold instead of rushing through it, chasing productivity as if staying busy could outrun the emptiness that used to live in my chest. Dr. Siriporn had asked me once, in one of our early sessions, what I did in the mornings. I'd laughed, bitter and self-deprecating, and said I checked my phone before my eyes were fully open. Scrolled through messages that weren't there. Refreshed feeds hoping for connection that never came.

"And what do you do now?" she'd asked, weeks later, when things had started to shift.

"I breathe," I'd told her. "I notice things. The light. The way my body feels. Whether I'm actually hungry or just anxious."

She'd smiled then, that particular smile she had when I said something that showed growth. "That's presence," she'd said. "That's what it looks like when you stop running from yourself."

I was present now. Lying in my bed, watching the light change, letting the day arrive at its own pace.

Eventually, I sat up.

The apartment spread around me in the morning quiet—small but mine, every corner of it holding evidence of the person I was becoming. The photographs on the walls, printed and framed, images I'd captured not for anyone else but because I'd found them beautiful. The bookshelf I'd finally organized, novels I'd been meaning to read mixed with photography collections I actually looked at now. The small kitchen visible through the doorway, clean in a way it hadn't been when depression had its hooks in me, when the dishes piled up because nothing seemed worth the effort of washing.

And on my desk, in the corner by the window: the resurrection plant. The painting of my hands.

I got out of bed and walked toward them.

The plant was fully unfurled now, its leaves a deep, living green, reaching toward the window with the particular optimism of something that had learned how to survive. When Lego had given it to me, it had looked like something you'd throw away—a brown husk, curled tight, so thoroughly dried out that I couldn't imagine it ever being alive. "It's not dead," he'd told me, his voice soft with meaning. "It's just waiting. You just have to add water."

I'd been skeptical. The plant looked beyond saving. But I'd watered it anyway—day after day, a small ritual that felt ridiculous at first and then became something else. Something like hope made tangible. Something like proof that patience and care could bring back things that seemed lost forever. Now it sat on my desk, green and full and reaching, and every time I looked at it I remembered what healing felt like. Not a dramatic transformation, not a single moment of breakthrough, but the slow, patient work of adding water. Day after day. Small kindnesses, repeated until they became a life.

The painting sat beside it. My hands, rendered in gray and blue, cradling a rose that seemed to glow even in the morning light. William had painted this during the worst of his isolation, when he couldn't leave his apartment, couldn't face the world, couldn't do anything except create. He'd painted my hands because he couldn't stop thinking about them—that's what his letter had said. The way I held my camera. The way I gestured when I talked. The way they shook slightly when I was nervous.

I looked at the painting now with something that wasn't longing, wasn't resentment, wasn't even the complicated grief I'd felt when I first opened the box. It was more like... acknowledgment. Recognition. This painting was proof that I had been seen. That during the months when I'd wondered if my feelings were one-sided, if I was imagining the connection, if William had ever really noticed me—during all of that, he had been watching. Paying attention. Recording what he saw in the language that came most naturally to him.

It didn't fix what had happened between us. His attention hadn't made him capable of a real relationship. His seeing me hadn't stopped him from pushing me away, from screaming at me to leave, from letting silence stretch between us until it felt like a wall too high to climb.

But it meant something.

It meant I hadn't been invisible. It meant my presence had registered on someone else's consciousness, had mattered enough to be translated into art. For a long time, that was what I'd been desperately seeking—proof that I existed. That I was worth noticing. That my absence would leave a gap in someone's world.

The difference now was that I didn't need the painting to believe that anymore.

I believed it because I had learned to see myself.

The kitchen was quiet as I filled the kettle.

Morning rituals had become important to me in a way I hadn't expected. Dr. Siriporn had explained it during one of our sessions—the way routine created stability, how small repeated actions could serve as anchors when the internal weather got rough. "You're building a container," she'd said. "A structure that holds you even when the feelings inside are chaotic."

I'd started with tea. It seemed silly at first—brewing actual tea, with leaves and steeping times and careful attention, when I could just grab coffee from a convenience store on my way to wherever I was going. But there was something about the ritual that slowed me down. Forced me to be present. Made me pay attention to the small, physical details of being alive.

Today I chose rose petal tea. For sweetness, Lego would say, but also for something else—a particular gentleness that felt right for a day full of being present for other people. I measured the dried petals into my infuser, watched them settle at the bottom of the cup, waited for the kettle to boil.

Through the kitchen window, Bangkok was waking up. The city sprawled in every direction, a chaos of buildings and traffic and humanity that had once felt overwhelming. Too much noise. Too much movement. Too many people living their lives while I felt frozen in mine. But today, watching the morning light catch the distant windows of high-rises, I felt something different. Not overwhelming—alive. The city was alive, and I was alive in it, and we were both just doing the daily work of existing.

The kettle whistled. I poured water over the rose petals and watched them unfurl, their color bleeding into the water like watercolor spreading across paper. Pink deepening to rose deepening to something almost red at the edges.

I thought about what Dr. Siriporn had said last week, in our most recent session. We'd been talking about my relationship with photography—how I'd used it, for so long, as a way of keeping the world at a distance. Looking through a lens instead of actually being present. Documenting life instead of living it.

"But you're using it differently now," she'd observed. "Tell me about that."

And I'd tried to explain. How the camera had shifted from a shield to a bridge. How photographing my friends wasn't about capturing them—it was about witnessing them. About paying attention so thoroughly that the image became a kind of love letter. I was here. I saw this. You mattered enough for me to want to remember.

"That's a significant shift," she'd said. "From protecting yourself to connecting with others."

"It still feels vulnerable," I'd admitted. "Every time I show someone a photo I've taken of them, it feels like I'm admitting something. Like I'm saying I was paying attention to you and hoping they don't find that creepy or too much."

"Is it too much?"

"I don't know. Maybe. But it's also... true. I do pay attention. I do notice things about people. That's just—that's how I am."

"And you're learning that the way you are isn't a flaw?"

The question had hit me harder than I expected. Because yes—for so long, I'd believed that my attention, my sensitivity, my tendency to notice and care and invest in people was a problem. Something to hide. Something that made me too much, too intense, the kind of person who drove others away by caring more than they could handle.

But maybe that wasn't true. Maybe the way I paid attention was actually a gift. Something I could offer to the people I loved, rendered in photographs instead of words, expressed through images instead of clumsy declarations.

The tea was ready. I carried it to my small table by the window and sat down, cradling the cup in my hands.

The morning passed slowly, in the best possible way. I drank my tea. Ate breakfast—actual breakfast, not just coffee, because feeding myself had become another form of self-care. Sat by the window and watched the city continue its Saturday rhythms. Let my thoughts drift without trying to control them.

At some point, I found myself looking at the photographs on my wall.

They were all mine—images I'd taken over the past few months, during the period of healing that had felt endless while I was living it but now seemed compressed,

significant, a chapter in a story that was still being written. There was the resurrection plant in various stages of unfurling—brown to hint-of-green to the deep emerald it was now. There were street scenes from my walks through the city, the particular quality of Bangkok light that I'd learned to appreciate. There were candid shots of my friends—Tui at the studio, Hong concentrating on a sketch, Lego mid-laugh with his whole face alight.

I'd printed them and hung them myself. That felt important somehow. Not waiting for someone else to decide my photos were worth displaying. Just choosing, myself, that this was art worth looking at. That my perspective was valid. That the way I saw the world deserved to be visible.

That was new too. The confidence. Or not confidence, exactly—something quieter. Self-trust, maybe. The ability to make a decision about my own life without waiting for external validation.

My phone buzzed.

The group chat. I smiled before I even looked at the screen, already knowing what I'd find—the familiar rhythm of my friends checking in, organizing, making sure everyone was on the same page for the day ahead.

Tui: Everyone ready for today? Hong's exhibition Day 2 + Lego's performance = very full schedule

Hong: I'm already at the gallery. Couldn't sleep. Came early.

Lego: Performance at 5pm! I'm stretching but also dying inside

Nut: I'm bringing coffee for Hong. He looked like he needed it.

I typed back: Wouldn't miss it. See you all soon.

Then I set down my phone and looked at my camera bag, already packed by the door.

There was a time when weekends meant emptiness. Long hours stretching ahead with nothing to fill them except the desperate hope that someone would text, someone would reach out, someone would prove that I existed by acknowledging my existence. I'd spent so many Saturdays waiting. Checking my phone. Spiraling into the particular loneliness that came from feeling invisible.

That wasn't today.

Today I had places to be. People who wanted me there. A camera full of empty memory cards waiting to be filled with moments worth preserving.

I finished my tea. Washed the cup carefully. Watered the resurrection plant,

watching the water soak into the soil around its roots.

"Keep growing," I told it. The words felt ridiculous, talking to a plant, but also right. We were both in this together—the plant and me. Both of us resurrection stories. Both of us proof that things that looked dead could learn to be alive again.

Then I picked up my camera bag and headed for the door.

The morning light was different outside. Brighter, harsher, the particular quality of Bangkok sun that cut through everything and laid the city bare. I walked toward the bus stop with my camera bag over my shoulder, feeling the weight of it against my hip—familiar, grounding, a reminder of who I was and what I was meant to be doing.

I wasn't in a hurry.

That felt significant too. For so long, I'd been rushing through my life—rushing to get to work, rushing through meals, rushing home to check my phone, rushing through weekends in the desperate hope that speed could outrun the emptiness. But now I walked slowly, letting my feet find their own rhythm, noticing things I would have ignored before.

The flower vendor on the corner, arranging bouquets with careful attention. The stray cat that had claimed the shaded spot under a parked car. The particular green of the trees that lined this street, their leaves catching the light and throwing patterns across the sidewalk.

I raised my camera.

The shot I took wasn't anything special—just the pattern of shadow and light on concrete, the way the leaves created this dappled effect that looked almost like water. But it was beautiful, in its quiet way. The kind of beauty I'd been too distracted to see when I was consumed by my own pain.

Dr. Siriporn and I had talked about this too. About how depression narrowed everything down, created this tunnel vision where only the pain was visible and everything else—the beauty, the kindness, the small moments of grace—faded into background noise. "Healing," she'd said, "isn't just about feeling better. It's about seeing more. Noticing what was always there but you couldn't access."

I was noticing now. The beauty that had always been there, waiting for me to be present enough to see it.

The bus arrived. I found a seat by the window and watched the city scroll past—familiar streets transformed by the particular angle of morning light, buildings I'd seen a thousand times looking somehow new. My camera rested on my lap, ready to capture anything that caught my eye. But I didn't take more photos. Not yet. Instead, I just looked.

Saw the old woman at a street food stall, stirring a pot with practiced efficiency. Saw the construction workers on their break, laughing at something on someone's phone. Saw a child in a school uniform, running to catch up with friends who had gotten ahead.

Ordinary life. Ordinary people. The endless, unremarkable miracle of existence continuing, day after day, moment after moment.

I thought about William, alone in his penthouse, trying to leave his apartment. Thought about the years he'd spent isolated, watching the world through floor-to-ceiling windows that kept him separate from everything outside. He'd been seeing life from a distance for so long—beautiful but untouchable, like something in a museum you weren't allowed to feel. I'd been doing something similar, I realized. Not through glass, but through my own walls. Watching life happen around me instead of participating in it. Keeping myself at a remove because closeness felt dangerous, because caring too much had hurt me, because it was safer to observe than to engage.

But I wasn't observing anymore. I was here, on this bus, surrounded by strangers who were all just living their lives, and I was living mine too. Present. Participating. Part of the endless flow instead of standing on the shore watching it pass.

The bus neared my stop. I gathered my camera bag and stood, holding the rail as the vehicle slowed. Today wasn't about me. Today was about Hong and Lego—their bravery, their vulnerability, their willingness to show the world who they really were. My job was to witness. To document. To capture the moments that would become proof, later, that they had been this brave. That was what my camera was for now. Not a shield. A love letter.

The university arts building glowed in the late morning light.

The entrance was busier than yesterday—I could see that even from a distance. Word had spread about the student exhibition, and people had come specifically to see. The balloon decorations from opening day were still there, slightly deflated now, but the energy was higher. More voices. More movement. More strangers moving through spaces that had been transformed by art.

I paused at the entrance, taking it in.

There was a time when crowds made me anxious. Too many people meant too many chances to feel invisible, too many reminders that everyone else seemed to know how to navigate the world while I fumbled at its edges. But today, looking at the stream of visitors entering the building, I felt something different.

Curiosity. Appreciation. The particular pleasure of watching people come together around creativity.

I raised my camera and took a shot of the entrance—the crowds flowing in, the signs pointing toward different exhibits, the particular quality of light that fell across the concrete. Not because anyone had asked me to. Just because the moment felt worth preserving. Inside, the building had the particular buzz of a successful event. Voices echoed off high ceilings. People clustered around pieces that had caught their attention. There was a palpable energy of appreciation, of engagement—the thing every artist hoped for but couldn't guarantee.

I made my way toward Hong's section.—"Almost" and "Fortress" and "The Real Me," hung carefully on their section of wall, the descriptions printed and displayed beside them. But the atmosphere around them had changed.

Yesterday had been friends and family, support born of relationship rather than assessment. Today, the people standing in front of Hong's work were strangers. People who had no connection to Hong, no reason to be kind, no obligation to appreciate what they saw. And they were stopping.

I watched from a distance, camera in hand. A young man stood in front of "Almost" for a long time, his head tilted slightly, his expression thoughtful. A woman read the description beside "Fortress" three times, her lips moving slightly, absorbing the words. And in front of "The Real Me"—In front of "The Real Me," a girl who couldn't have been more than eighteen was crying. Not dramatically, not with sobs or sounds. Just quiet tears tracking down her face as she looked at the distorted mirror, the figure caught between hiding and being seen. She was alone, and she was crying, and I understood exactly what she was feeling because I'd felt it too.

For everyone who has looked in a mirror and wondered if what they saw was worthy of love.

Hong had painted that. Had put those words on a wall. And now a stranger was standing in front of them, recognizing herself in Hong's pain, finding some kind of comfort in knowing she wasn't alone. I didn't photograph her. Some moments were too private, too sacred. But I watched, and I felt something expand in my chest. This was what art could do. Not just express the artist's truth, but create space for the audience to find their own. Hong's vulnerability wasn't just about Hong—it was about everyone who had ever asked those questions, ever felt that particular terror of looking at yourself and not being sure you were real.

I moved through the gallery, camera raised, capturing what I saw.

Hong wasn't in his section yet—probably still somewhere else in the building, too nervous to stand next to his paintings while strangers examined them. But the evidence of impact was everywhere. In the faces of people who stopped and looked. In the way they lingered, thinking, absorbing. In the quiet conversations I overheard—people trying to articulate what they were feeling, reaching for words that weren't quite adequate.



I photographed a pair of students standing in front of "Fortress," their heads bent together as they discussed something in low voices. Captured the way the light fell across "The Real Me," making the distorted reflection seem to shimmer. Documented the artist statements on the wall, the words Hong had agonized over made permanent and public. Every shot felt like an act of love. Every click of the shutter was a way of saying: This matters. I was paying attention. I want to remember.

I found Hong around noon, tucked into a corner of the gallery near his paintings but not quite in front of them. Watching from a safe distance. Nut was beside him, their hands linked, that quiet support that seemed to be Nut's love language.

"There you are," I said, approaching them. "I've been documenting your section. Hope that's okay."

Hong looked up, something like relief crossing his face. "Est. I didn't know when you'd get here."

"I was wandering. Taking photos." I lifted my camera slightly. "Your paintings are making people cry."

Hong's expression shifted—alarm, then something softer. "Cry?"

"Good crying. The kind that means something reached them."

He was quiet for a moment, processing this. Nut squeezed his hand, that silent communication that couples developed. "I didn't—" Hong started, then stopped. Tried again. "I wasn't sure if anyone would actually—if strangers would—"

"They do," I said gently. "They're stopping. They're reading. They're having actual reactions to what you made." I paused, watching his face. "How does that feel?"

"Terrifying," he admitted. "But also—" He looked toward his section of the wall, toward the people still gathered there. "Also kind of incredible. That something I felt, something I painted alone in my room at three in the morning—that it's connecting with people who don't even know me."

"That's what art does." I thought about William's painting, still on my desk at home. The hands holding the rose. The attention he'd paid without me knowing. "It takes something private and makes it shared. Suddenly you're not alone in it anymore."

Hong nodded slowly. "Like your photos," he said. "The way you capture things. It's not just documenting—it's showing us what you see. What you notice. What matters to you."

The observation caught me off guard. I hadn't thought about it that way, but he was right. Every photo I took was a kind of revelation. A confession of attention. This is what I saw. This is what I thought was beautiful. This is who I am, expressed in what

I choose to frame.

"I've been thinking about that," I said. "The connection between seeing and being seen. How—" I paused, searching for words. "How for so long I was desperate to be seen by other people. By my parents, by William, by anyone. Like I needed external validation to know I existed."

"And now?"

"Now I'm the one doing the seeing." I lifted my camera again. "I'm paying attention. I'm noticing. And somehow that feels—" I struggled for the right word. "More sustainable. Like instead of waiting for someone to prove I matter, I'm actively participating in mattering. If that makes any sense."

"It makes sense," Hong said quietly. "That's what therapy taught you?"

"Therapy, and time, and—" I looked at him, at Nut, at the gallery around us. "And having people who actually show up. Friends who make me feel like my presence is valuable without me having to earn it constantly."

Nut smiled. "That's what chosen family is for."

"Yeah." I smiled back. "Yeah, it is."

I spent the next few hours moving through the gallery, camera in hand. The exhibition wasn't just Hong's work—there were dozens of other students showing, their pieces spread throughout the building in various configurations. Photography series and ceramic installations and paintings in every style I could imagine. I documented it all, not because anyone had asked me to, but because documenting felt right. This was what I did now. Paid attention. Noticed things. Made record of moments that might otherwise pass unpreserved.

The light shifted as the morning became afternoon, changing the way everything looked. The crowds ebbed and flowed, different faces appearing and disappearing. I took photos of strangers examining art, of children dragged along by artistic parents, of professors deep in discussion about technique and meaning.

And I took photos of my friends.

Hong and Nut, still in their corner, their hands still linked. The way Hong's shoulders had gradually relaxed as the morning proved that yesterday wasn't a fluke. The way Nut watched Hong like he was the only thing in the room worth seeing. I captured those moments carefully. Not for any assignment, not for any professional purpose. Just because I wanted to remember. Because someday, when we were all older and our lives had scattered us in different directions, I wanted to look at these images and remember exactly how it felt to be surrounded by people I loved.

Around noon, I saw them arrive. Lego and Tui, entering the gallery together. I

spotted them from across the room—Lego's bright energy visible even from a distance, Tui's steady presence a counterbalance beside him. They were standing close together, close enough that their shoulders almost touched, and there was something in the way they moved that hadn't been there before.

Something had changed between them. I didn't know what, exactly—maybe nothing I could articulate, nothing I could point to. But there was a new ease. A new awareness. The way people carried themselves when something had shifted from potential to actual.

Lego was already in makeup for his performance—striking and intentional, the kind of look that transformed his soft features into something more dramatic. The extensions were back, pulled into a high ponytail that made him look both older and more ethereal. But beneath the performance-ready exterior, I could see the nervous energy radiating off him. The particular brightness in his smile that came from pushing through something rather than actually feeling okay.

They found me near the entrance to Hong's section.

"P'Est!" Lego's face lit up when he spotted me. "You're here! You've been here all morning?"

"Since about eleven." I lifted my camera. "Documenting."

"Of course you are." Lego's smile was warm, genuine despite the anxiety underneath. "That's so you."

"How are you feeling?" I asked, watching his face carefully. "About later?"

"Terrified." The word came out with a laugh that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Excited. Like I might throw up at any moment." He glanced at Tui. "P'Tui has been keeping me calm. Mostly."

"I've been trying," Tui said dryly. "He's very dedicated to panicking."

"I'm dedicated to many things. Panicking is just one of them."

We moved toward Hong's section together, the four of us joining Nut where he waited. The group congregated near the paintings—all of us together now, all of us present for this moment of gathered support.

There was warmth here. The easy comfort of people who had chosen each other. Tui made a joke about Hong's "serious artist face"—the expression Hong got when he was trying not to look nervous—and Lego laughed, adjusting Hong's collar with a small gesture of care. Nut hovered close, clearly proud, his hand finding Hong's like a reflex.

I raised my camera. The shot I captured was imperfect—slightly blurred, the lighting

not quite right, everyone caught mid-motion rather than posed and polished. But it showed something true. The group reflected in the glass of a nearby frame, overlaid with fragments of Hong's paintings. Chosen family, gathered to witness each other's vulnerability.

I looked at the image on my camera screen and felt something settle in my chest. This was what healing looked like. Not the dramatic breakthrough, not the single moment of transformation. Just this: showing up. Being present. Letting yourself be part of something bigger than your own pain.

"Hong's stuff is holding up," Tui observed, looking at the paintings. "Yesterday could have been a fluke—friends and family showing support, you know? But today, strangers are actually stopping. Actually looking."

"I noticed that too." I said.

"He's going to be okay." Tui's voice carried a particular warmth. "He was so scared yesterday. But he did it anyway. And now he's seeing that the fear didn't kill him."

"That's what courage looks like," I said, echoing something Dr. Siriporn had told me once. "Doing it anyway."

Tui looked at me with an expression I couldn't quite read. Something like recognition. Something like pride.

"Speaking of courage," he said. "How are you doing? Really?"

The question landed differently now than it would have months ago. Before, I would have deflected—fine, good, don't worry about me. I would have redirected the attention, avoided the vulnerability of admitting that I wasn't always okay.

But I'd learned something in therapy. Something about the difference between vulnerability and weakness. About how letting people see you—really see you, the scared parts and the struggling parts and the parts that still didn't have it all figured out—was actually a form of connection rather than a liability.

"I'm good," I said, and meant it. "Still growing, still figuring things out. But good." I looked at my camera, at the image of all of us reflected in the glass. "Days like today help. Being part of something instead of watching from the outside."

"You were never really on the outside," Lego said softly. "Even when you felt like you were. We saw you, P'Est. We always saw you."

The words hit me somewhere deep.

We saw you.

For so long, that was all I'd wanted. To be seen. To matter. To have someone notice

my existence and find it worthwhile. I'd chased that need through all the wrong places—through my parents who couldn't give it, through William who wasn't capable of it, through strangers and achievements and the desperate hope that if I was just enough, someone would finally see. But my friends had been seeing me all along. Quietly, consistently, without me having to perform or prove or be anything other than exactly who I was.

"Thank you," I said. The words felt inadequate for everything they were trying to carry, but they were all I had. "For seeing me. For showing up. For—all of it."

"That's what we do," Tui said simply. "That's what chosen family means."

The afternoon moved toward evening, toward the hour when everything would shift.

The exhibition continued—more strangers, more reactions, more evidence that Hong's art was reaching people in exactly the ways he'd hoped and feared. But under everything was the awareness of what was coming. Five o'clock. Lego's performance. The showcase he'd been preparing for months, pushed through despite exhaustion and pain and the particular weight he carried that most people never saw.

We had lunch together in a café near the arts building—all of us, the whole group that had become my family. The conversation was light on the surface, full of jokes and teasing and the easy comfort of people who knew each other well. But underneath, I could feel the tension. Lego's nervous energy. Hong's lingering anxiety about his own exhibition. The particular awareness that we were all about to witness something significant.

After lunch, Lego had to leave for warmups.

"I should go," he said, standing from the table. "I need to be at the venue early. Stretching, mental preparation, all of that."

"We'll be there," I promised. "Front row."

"Not front row!" Lego's eyes widened in mock horror. "You'll make me nervous. Middle section. Where I can see you if I need to but you're not staring directly at me."

"Middle section," I agreed. "Deal."

He hesitated, something shifting in his expression. The brightness dimming just slightly, revealing the anxiety underneath.

"Thank you," he said, his voice quieter than usual. "For being here. For—" He gestured vaguely at all of us, at the café table, at the morning we'd shared. "For this."

"That's what we do," Tui said, echoing his earlier words. "That's what chosen family means."

"You're going to be amazing." Hong said.

"You have to say that. You're my friend."

"I'm saying it because it's true."

Lego's smile trembled at the edges. For just a moment, I saw it—the exhaustion, the fear, the weight he was carrying. The performance he was about to give, with his knee still healing, with his heart still hurting, with all the complicated emotions he kept hidden under brightness and smiles. Then the moment passed, and he was gathering his things, and Tui was standing too.

"I'll walk you there," Tui said. "Make sure you get settled."

"You don't have to—"

"I want to."

Something passed between them—unspoken, significant. Lego nodded, accepting the offer, and they left together. Their shoulders brushed as they walked toward the door, that new ease visible in every step.

I watched them go, camera in hand, and didn't take the shot.

Some moments weren't meant to be captured. Some were just meant to be witnessed.

The hours between lunch and the performance passed in a particular kind of waiting. Hong went back to his exhibition—more people to watch, more reactions to absorb. Nut went with him, that steady presence never far from Hong's side. I wandered for a while, camera in hand, taking shots of the campus as the afternoon light shifted and changed. I found myself in the university gardens, sitting on a bench under a tree that filtered the sunlight into soft, dappled patterns. The kind of quiet moment that would have felt unbearable once—too much space for my thoughts to spiral, too much silence for my anxiety to fill.

But today, the quiet felt okay.

I sat with my camera in my lap, reviewing the photos I'd taken. The paintings in the gallery, lit by morning sun. Hong's nervous pride, visible in the set of his shoulders. Strangers recognizing themselves in art they'd never seen before. The group reflected in glass—chosen family, gathered to witness each other's bravery.

And I thought about what it meant, this shift I'd undergone. There was a version of me, not so long ago, who would have looked at these photos and felt envy. Who

would have seen Hong's exhibition and thought why not me. Who would have photographed joy and felt only the ache of his own absence from it.

But that wasn't what I felt now.

Looking at these images—my friends, their triumphs, their vulnerability made visible—I felt something closer to gratitude. Pride. The particular warmth of caring about people and having them care back.

I wasn't the center of the story anymore. And that was okay.

That was more than okay.

For so long, I'd believed that happiness meant being loved. Being chosen. Having someone look at me the way Nut looked at Hong, or the way Tui was starting to look at Lego. I'd chased that need through all the wrong places, convinced that romantic love was the only thing that could fill the emptiness inside me.

But the emptiness wasn't there anymore. Not because I'd found someone to love me—I hadn't. William's painting was a beautiful gesture, but it wasn't a relationship. Nut and Hong had each other. Tui and Lego were becoming something. And I was—I was here. Alone on a bench in a university garden. Camera in my lap. Photos of people I loved filling my memory card.

And I was happy.

The realization hit me like a small revelation. Not the dramatic, world-changing kind—just a quiet recognition of something that had been true for a while without me quite noticing.

I was happy. Not because my life was perfect, not because I had everything I'd ever wanted, but because I'd learned to want what I had. Because the people in my life were enough. Because I was enough—for myself, by myself, without needing someone else to complete me.

That was what therapy had given me. What Dr. Siriporn had helped me understand. That the desperate need to be loved had always been, at its core, a desperate need to believe I was worth loving. And I didn't need external proof anymore. I'd learned to see it from the inside.

The resurrection plant on my desk, fully unfurled. The photographs on my walls, images I'd chosen to preserve. The friends who showed up, again and again, to witness each other's bravery.

Proof of a life worth living. Evidence that I was already alive.

I sat there for a long time, letting the realization settle. The sun moved across the sky, the shadows lengthened, the afternoon moved steadily toward evening.

And when it was time to go—time to head to the performance venue, time to be there for Lego the way he'd been there for me—I stood up feeling something I could only call peace. Not the absence of fear, not the absence of pain. Just the quiet knowledge that I was where I was supposed to be. That I was becoming who I was supposed to become. That the journey wasn't over, but the person walking it was someone I was learning to trust. I picked up my camera and headed toward the theater.

Lego's showcase was about to begin and I was going to be there to witness it.

The performance hall was a different world entirely. Where the gallery had been diffuse light and quiet contemplation—spaces between people, time to think, the freedom to move at your own pace—the theater was focused energy. Compressed. Every seat pointed toward the same place, every person oriented in the same direction, all of that scattered attention gathered and aimed at a stage that was currently dark and waiting.

I found our section with the others—middle seats, as Lego had requested. Close enough to see, far enough not to pressure. Tui was already there, saving seats, his expression carrying something I couldn't quite read. Hong and Nut arrived moments after I did, Hong still slightly flushed from his own day of being witnessed.

"How is he?" Hong asked, settling into the seat beside Tui. "I saw him briefly before he went backstage but he seemed—"

"Nervous," Tui said. The word came out heavier than it should have. "More nervous than usual."

"He's been pushing himself too hard," I said. "The knee, the exhaustion—he's running on fumes."

Tui nodded, his jaw tight. "I know. I've been trying to—" He stopped, shook his head. "He doesn't let anyone help. Not really. He accepts it on the surface, but underneath he's still carrying everything himself."

There was something in his voice that hadn't been there before. Something that sounded like pain that had become personal. Like watching Lego hurt was hurting him in ways he hadn't expected to feel.

I thought about the shift I'd noticed between them—the new ease, the way their shoulders brushed when they walked together, the particular attention Tui paid to Lego's movements and expressions. I'd known Tui since university. We'd been through scholarships and struggles and the particular bond that formed between people who understood each other's damage. I'd seen him date, casually, nothing that ever seemed to reach beneath the surface of his steady calm.

But this was different.



This was the first time I'd seen Tui in love.

"I'm going backstage," I said, standing abruptly. "Just for a moment. Before it starts."

Tui looked up at me, something flickering in his expression—gratitude, maybe, or understanding. "Tell him—" He stopped. "Just tell him we're here."

"I will."

The backstage area was controlled chaos. Student performers in various stages of preparation, faculty coordinators with clipboards and stressed expressions, families trying to deliver last-minute flowers or encouragement. I navigated through it carefully, my camera bag pressed against my side, searching for the familiar shape of Lego's energy.

I found him in a corner, away from the main flow of activity. He was alone, which surprised me—Lego was rarely alone, always surrounded by people who gravitated toward his brightness. But here, in the dim light of the backstage wing, he sat on a low bench with his back against the wall, his body folded into a position I recognized from watching him stretch.

Except he wasn't stretching. He was—He was taking off his knee brace.

The gesture was slow, careful, his fingers working the velcro straps with practiced efficiency. The brace came away to reveal skin that looked tender, slightly swollen, the evidence of strain that he'd been hiding under compression and smiles.

"Lego." I said softly.

He looked up. For just a moment, before the brightness reassembled itself, I saw something underneath. Exhaustion so deep it lived in his bones. Fear that coiled in his chest like a sleeping animal. The particular weight of someone who had been performing strength for so long that he'd forgotten what it felt like to be weak.

"P'Est." His smile appeared, automatic as breathing, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "You came backstage."

"I wanted to see you. Before." I moved closer, lowering myself to sit beside him on the bench. "How are you feeling? Really?"

The question hung between us. He could deflect—I expected him to deflect, expected the usual bright assurances that he was fine, that everything was fine, that nothing could touch the sunshine he projected to the world. But something was different tonight.

"I'm terrified," he admitted. The word came out quiet, almost surprised, like he hadn't meant to say it out loud. "P'Est, I'm so scared I can barely breathe."

I didn't try to fix it. Didn't offer platitudes or reassurance. Just sat there, present, letting the truth of his fear exist between us without needing to be managed or minimized.

"This isn't my choreography," he continued, his voice still soft. "The piece I'm performing—I wasn't supposed to dance it. Someone else created it. Someone else was supposed to be on that stage. But she—" He stopped, swallowed. "And I learned it in days."

"Ten days?"

"Twelve-hour rehearsals. Sometimes more." He looked down at his knee, at the brace in his hands. "My body is screaming at me, P'Est. Everything hurts. And I have to go out there and make it look effortless."

I understood now. The exhaustion I'd been seeing, the particular edge to his brightness—it wasn't just the normal stress of performance. He'd been destroying himself to fill someone else's place. Taking on a burden that wasn't his because that's what Lego did. Because he didn't know how to say no when someone needed him.

"Why didn't you tell us?" I asked. "We would have—"

"What? Told me not to do it?" His laugh was small, brittle. "It's too late for that. The show is in—" He checked the time. "Twenty minutes. I'm going on whether my knee holds or not."

"That's not what I meant." I reached out and took his hand, the gesture unfamiliar between us but feeling right somehow. "I meant we would have been here more. Supporting you through the learning, not just the performing."

His fingers squeezed mine briefly. "I know. I know you would have. But I—" He struggled for words. "I didn't want anyone to see me falling apart. I needed to do this on my own."

"You're not on your own," I said. "You've never been on your own. Even when you think you're hiding it, we see you."

The words hit something in him. I could see it—the way his expression shifted, the brightness flickering like a candle in wind. For a moment, I thought he might cry.

But then footsteps approached, and we both looked up to see Tui.

He was framed in the backstage light, his silhouette familiar and solid. His eyes found Lego immediately, tracking over the brace in his hands, the careful way he was holding his leg, the tension in every line of his body.

"Hey." Tui said softly. Just that. Just a single syllable.

But something passed between them—I could feel it, even from my position beside Lego. A current of understanding. Of acknowledgment. Of something deeper than the friendship I'd observed between them for months.

Lego's breath caught. "P'Tui."

Tui crossed to us in three long strides. Without a word, he dropped to his knees in front of Lego, his hands reaching for the brace Lego was still holding. I watched him examine the knee with careful attention—not medically, but with the particular focus of someone who cared, who had been paying attention, who knew exactly what Lego had been hiding and had chosen not to push until Lego was ready.

"You should have told me it was this bad." Tui said quietly.

"I know."

"I would have—"

"I know." Lego's voice cracked on the repetition. "I know you would have done anything. That's why I didn't tell you. Because you would have tried to fix it, and this isn't fixable. Not now. The only thing left is to do it."

Tui looked up at him. Their eyes met and held. I should have looked away. This moment wasn't meant for me—it was something private, something sacred, the kind of vulnerability that existed between two people who were becoming more than friends. But I was frozen in place, witness to something I hadn't expected to see.

Tui reached up and cupped Lego's face in his hands.

"Listen to me," he said, his voice low and fierce. "You're going to go out there, and you're going to be brilliant. Not because you're pretending to be fine—because you're strong enough to be honest. To let them see what you're feeling. That's what makes it art."

Lego's eyes were wet now, tears threatening to spill.

"And when it's over," Tui continued, "I'm going to be right here. Waiting for you. No matter what happens on that stage, I'm not going anywhere."

"P'Tui—"

"I mean it." Tui's thumbs brushed across Lego's cheekbones, catching tears that had started to fall. "I should have said this weeks ago. Months ago. But I was scared, and I was stupid, and I thought—" He shook his head. "It doesn't matter what I thought. What matters is that I'm here now, and I'm not leaving."

The words hung in the air between them, heavy with meaning.

And then Tui pulled Lego into his arms.

I watched them hold each other—really hold each other, the kind of embrace that wasn't about comfort or friendship but about something deeper. Tui's hand cradled the back of Lego's head, fingers threading through the extensions in his high ponytail. Lego's face was buried in Tui's shoulder, his whole body trembling with the weight of everything he'd been carrying alone.

They stayed like that for a long time. Too long for casual. Too long for anything but what it was. And Tui whispered something into Lego's ear—words I couldn't hear, wasn't meant to hear. But I saw the way Lego's body relaxed incrementally. The way his shoulders dropped. The way he breathed out a sound that might have been a sob or might have been relief.

I raised my camera.

The shot I captured wasn't meant for anyone else. Just for them—for later, when they wanted to remember this moment. Tui's arms wrapped around Lego, protective and tender. Lego surrendering into the embrace, letting himself be held. The dim backstage light creating shadows that made them look like something from a painting. Then I lowered my camera and stood quietly, giving them whatever privacy I could in a space full of strangers.

When they finally separated, Lego's makeup was smudged and his eyes were red. But there was something different in his expression. Something that looked almost like peace.

"Five minutes," a stage manager called, moving through the wings. "Five minutes to places."

Lego took a deep breath. Let it out slowly.

"Time to go," he said. The brightness was back in his voice, but it was different now—real instead of performed. The kind of light that came from being seen, from being supported, from knowing you weren't alone.

Tui kissed his forehead—brief, gentle, a promise.

"I'll be in the audience," he said. "Middle section. Look for me if you need to."

Lego nodded. Then he turned to me, his expression soft with gratitude.

"Thank you, P'Est. For being here. For—" He gestured at the camera in my hands. "For witnessing this."

"That's what family does," I said. "We show up. We see each other."

He smiled—his real smile, the one that didn't perform brightness but simply was

bright. And then he was walking toward the wings, toward the stage, toward the moment he'd been destroying himself to prepare for.

Tui and I watched him go.

"You love him." I said quietly. Not a question.

Tui was silent for a moment. Then: "Yeah. I do."

"Good." I touched his shoulder briefly, a gesture of solidarity. "He needs that. Someone who sees all of it—the brightness and the shadows—and chooses to stay anyway."

Tui looked at me, something shifting in his expression. Understanding, maybe. Recognition of everything I wasn't saying about my own journey, my own learning, my own understanding of what it meant to be seen.

"We should get to our seats." he said finally.

We walked back to the audience together, leaving Lego to find his way to the stage alone—but not really alone. Never really alone again.

The lights dimmed. The audience fell into hushed anticipation, conversations trailing off, bodies settling into seats, attention gathering and focusing toward the stage. I felt Tui tense beside me, his whole body oriented toward the velvet curtains that still hid whatever was about to happen.

"He's going to be amazing," Hong whispered from Tui's other side. "He has to be. He's Lego."

Nut's hand found Hong's in the darkness, that quiet support that seemed to be their language. I raised my camera, adjusting for the low light, preparing to document whatever came next.

The curtains parted.

And Lego appeared.

For a moment—just a moment—I forgot to breathe.

He stood alone in a pool of light at center stage, completely still, his body creating a shape that looked both powerful and vulnerable. The costume was stunning—a two-piece red suit, the fabric stretched in a way that caught the light, shiny and slightly transparent, moving almost like liquid when he breathed. One shoulder was left visible, the fabric cut away to show the clean line of his collarbone, and on the same side he wore a long glove that extended above his elbow, the red darker than the suit, almost the color of wine.

The makeup I'd seen being applied backstage looked different under stage lighting

—more dramatic, the shimmer catching and throwing light with every subtle movement of his face. His eyes were lined in gold, his lips darkened to match the glove, his cheekbones highlighted in a way that made him look almost otherworldly.

He looked like something from a dream. Or a painting. Something too beautiful to be real.

But beneath the costume—beneath the makeup and the carefully constructed image—I could still see the exhaustion. The particular tension in his shoulders that came from pain he was trying to hide. The way he held his weight just slightly to the left, protecting the knee that had been swollen and tender just minutes ago.

He was about to dance on a body that was begging him to stop. And he was going to make it look like art.

The music began.

It started quiet—a single note, sustained, building slowly. Lego didn't move at first. He stood in that pool of light, perfectly still, letting the sound wash over him and the audience. The anticipation was almost unbearable. Every person in the theater was holding their breath, waiting for something to happen, not knowing what it would be.

And then he moved.

It was subtle at first—a shift in his weight, a tilt of his head, the barest beginning of something. But the moment his body started to respond to the music, I understood what I was watching. This wasn't just dance. This wasn't just technique or training or the physical execution of choreography.

This was grief made visible.

He reached for something that wasn't there—his arm extending into empty space, his fingers grasping, finding nothing. The movement was so small, so precise, so devastatingly honest that I felt something crack open in my chest.

The music swelled, and Lego's body responded. He moved across the stage with a fluidity that seemed impossible—his limbs creating shapes that were both controlled and wild, his face showing the particular focus of someone who was not performing but being. Every gesture told a story. Every movement carried weight.

I raised my camera and began to shoot. Through the lens, I saw what I might have missed with bare eyes. The way Lego's expression shifted with the music—pain giving way to longing giving way to something that looked like hope before collapsing back into pain. The precise control of his hands, each finger intentional, each angle deliberate. The way his body seemed to argue with itself—reaching upward while being pulled down, fighting for something even as it surrendered.

He was telling a story about loss. About loving something you couldn't keep. About the terrible weight of carrying on when everything in you wanted to stop. I thought about what he'd told me backstage—that this wasn't his choreography. That he'd learned it in ten days. That he was dancing someone else's piece, filling a space that wasn't supposed to be his.

But watching him now, I understood something different. The choreography might have been created by someone else, but what Lego was doing on that stage was entirely his own. He had taken the movements and filled them with his own grief. His own loneliness. His own years of being abandoned by parents who should have stayed, of being left to build fortresses against a world that kept asking him to be strong when he was just a kid who wanted to be held.

This was Lego's pain. Transformed into beauty. Offered to a room full of strangers who had no idea what it cost him to be this honest.

The music shifted—became more frantic, more desperate. Lego's movements matched it, his body pushing harder, faster, the choreography demanding things that made me wince knowing what his knee was enduring. But he didn't falter. Didn't slow. He danced like he was trying to escape something, like he was fighting his way out of a trap made of his own making.

And then—

The breaking moment. It happened in the middle of a sequence that should have been beautiful. Lego was spinning, his body creating a spiral of red fabric and golden light, and then suddenly he collapsed. Not fully—not a fall, not an accident—but a controlled descent that looked like surrender. Like the moment when you stop fighting and let the thing you've been running from finally catch you.

He crumpled to the stage floor. Curled in on himself. His arms wrapped around his own body in a gesture so protective, so vulnerable, that I felt tears prick at my eyes.

The music quieted to almost nothing—a single sustained note, barely audible. And Lego stayed there. Still. Small. Looking exactly like what he was: a boy who had been carrying too much for too long, finally allowed to put it down.

The silence stretched. The audience seemed afraid to breathe.

I captured the moment—click—the sound of my shutter feeling almost intrusive in the stillness. Through the viewfinder, I saw Lego's face in profile, pressed against the stage floor, his expression showing something that wasn't performance anymore. Just truth. Just pain. Just the honest reality of what it felt like to be this tired and this brave.

Then the music began to build again.

Slowly. Gently. The single note becoming two, then three, then a chord that sounded like hope trying to find its footing. And Lego moved with it—uncurling, lifting, rising from the floor like something being born. The collapse wasn't the ending. It was the turning point.

He stood again. Different now. The desperation was still there, but so was something else—determination, maybe. The particular strength that came from having survived the worst and still choosing to keep going. His movements became more grounded, more certain. Still grieving, still heavy with loss, but no longer drowning in it. He danced the aftermath. The learning to live with. The way you carry the weight of what you've lost even as you move forward.

The choreography built toward its climax—complex sequences that required everything Lego had, demanding his full attention and focus. I watched him execute movements that should have been impossible on an injured knee, his technique flawless even as his face showed the cost. He was giving everything. Holding nothing back. Dancing like this was the last time, like this moment was all that existed, like the pain didn't matter because the art was worth it.

And then the final sequence.

Lego moved to center stage, back where he'd started, the circle complete. The music was fading now, returning to that single sustained note, and his movements slowed to match. He reached out one more time—that same gesture from the beginning, fingers grasping for something that wasn't there. But this time, when he found nothing, he didn't collapse.

He brought his hand to his chest instead. Placed it over his heart. And stood there, still and solid, letting the emptiness exist without being destroyed by it.

The music faded to silence.

Lego held the pose.

One breath. Two. Three.

And then the lights went dark.

The applause was deafening. It started the moment the stage went black—a roar of recognition, of gratitude, of collective acknowledgment that something extraordinary had just happened. I was on my feet before I realized I'd stood, clapping so hard my palms stung, my camera still gripped in one hand.

Beside me, Tui was standing too. His face was wet with tears he wasn't trying to hide.

The lights came back up slowly, revealing Lego at center stage. He was breathing hard, his chest heaving, sweat visible on his forehead despite the makeup. His eyes



were bright—too bright—with tears that were starting to fall.

The audience kept clapping. People were cheering now, voices rising above the applause, and then someone in the front row stood and the standing ovation spread across the theater like a wave.

Lego stood there, receiving it all. His smile was trembling at the edges, barely holding together, the particular expression of someone who was overwhelmed and grateful and completely unsure how to process what was happening.

He bowed—once, deep and formal. Then again, shorter. Then a third time, his hand pressed to his heart in that same gesture from the finale, like he was thanking them for witnessing, for staying, for not looking away.

I raised my camera one more time.

The shot I captured showed Lego in the moment between performance and real life. The mask wasn't quite back in place. His makeup was smudged from tears and sweat. His body was trembling with exhaustion. But his face—his face showed something I would never forget. Joy and grief tangled together. Pride and vulnerability. The particular expression of someone who had just given away pieces of their soul and been met with applause instead of rejection.

The curtain came down.

The lights came up.

And the audience slowly, reluctantly, began to file toward the exits—still buzzing with what they'd witnessed, still carrying the weight of what they'd felt.

Backstage was chaos and emotion. I navigated through the crowds—student performers embracing each other, professors offering congratulations, families trying to find their dancers in the maze of corridors. The energy was high, almost frantic, the particular release that came after the tension of performance had been sustained for hours.

I found Lego in a corner, away from the main flow.

He was surrounded by our group—Hong hugging him carefully, avoiding the injured knee, his face showing the particular tenderness of someone who understood exactly what it cost to be that vulnerable in public. Nut stood beside Hong, holding a bottle of water and looking slightly overwhelmed by the emotions swirling around him. Other dancers and students orbited nearby, offering quick congratulations before being swept away by their own supporters.

And Tui—

Tui stood closest of all. His hand rested on Lego's lower back, that same protective,

tender position I'd noticed backstage before the performance. But now it was different. Now it was claiming. Now it was the gesture of someone who had decided to stop hiding what he felt.

"P'Est!" Lego spotted me approaching, his face lighting up despite the exhaustion. "You're here!"

"I'm here." I moved into the circle, into the warmth of my friends. "Lego, that was—"

"Don't." He laughed, the sound wet with tears he was still trying not to shed fully. "If you say something nice I'm going to cry more."

"Then cry." I held up my camera, turning it so he could see the screen. "But first—look. This is what you did. This is what you gave everyone who was watching."

He took the camera from me with hands that trembled slightly—from exhaustion, from emotion, from the particular aftermath of pushing a body beyond its limits. I watched his face as he scrolled through the images.

Frame after frame of himself in motion. The opening pose, still and powerful. The reaching gesture, fingers grasping empty air. The collapse, his body curled on the stage floor, vulnerable and broken-looking. The rising, hope finding its footing. The final moment, hand pressed to heart, surviving the emptiness.

"You saw all of this?" he whispered.

"I was paying attention." The words came out heavier than I intended. "You mattered enough to capture."

His eyes met mine, and I saw understanding there. Understanding of what I meant—not just about tonight, but about everything. About the way my camera had become a language of love. About the difference between documenting and witnessing. About what it meant to really see someone, to find them worth the attention it took to preserve their moments.

"P'Est." His voice cracked. "Thank you. For—" He gestured at the camera, at himself, at the whole impossible night. "For witnessing this."

"That's what we do," I said. "That's what family means."

And then I stepped back, giving space for the moment I could see building between him and Tui.

Tui moved forward. His hands found Lego's face again—that same gesture from backstage, thumbs brushing across cheekbones, cradling with a tenderness that made my chest ache to witness.

"You were incredible," Tui said, his voice low enough that I almost didn't hear it. "Do

you understand that? What you just did up there—"

"I almost fell during the third sequence," Lego admitted. "My knee—"

"I don't care about the technical execution." Tui's voice was fierce now. "I'm not talking about the steps or the timing or any of that. I'm talking about what you gave. The honesty. The grief. The—" He struggled for words. "You let them see you. Really see you. And it was the most beautiful thing I've ever watched."

Lego's tears were falling freely now, cutting tracks through what remained of his stage makeup.

"I was so scared," he whispered. "The whole time. I kept thinking—what if they don't understand? What if they think it's too much? What if—"

"They understood." Tui pulled him close, wrapping his arms around Lego's trembling body. "Everyone in that audience understood. I could see it on their faces. You reached them."

They held each other in the chaos of backstage—other performers swirling around them, voices and laughter and tears filling the air—but they existed in their own pocket of stillness. Lego's face buried in Tui's shoulder. Tui's hand stroking down his back in slow, soothing motions. Two people who had finally stopped pretending they weren't essential to each other.

I raised my camera one more time.

The shot wasn't staged. Wasn't posed. Just the two of them, holding each other like the world had narrowed to this single point of contact. Tui's expression showed something I'd never seen on his face before—not the steady calm I knew, not the protector energy he usually projected, but something raw and new. The particular vulnerability of someone who had just admitted to loving another person and was waiting to see if they'd survive it.

And Lego—Lego looked like someone who had finally put down a weight he'd been carrying his entire life. His body molded against Tui's like it had always belonged there. His face, what I could see of it, showed relief so profound it was almost painful to witness.

This was what love looked like. Not the desperate grasping I'd done with William. Not the conditional offering my parents had given me. But this—this steady, patient, seeing kind of love. The kind that showed up. That witnessed. That stayed even when staying was hard.

I lowered my camera.

Some moments were meant to be witnessed. Others were meant to be lived.

Hong appeared at my elbow, his own face wet with tears—sympathetic crying, probably, the particular response of someone who felt things deeply and couldn't help absorbing the emotions of people around him.

"That was—" He stopped, shook his head. "I don't have words for that."

"You don't need words," I said. "You just need to be here."

"Yeah." He leaned into me slightly, seeking warmth, seeking connection. "I guess that's the whole point, isn't it? Just being here."

I looked at our group—these people who had become my family over months of shared pain and healing and witness. Lego still wrapped in Tui's arms, finally letting himself be held. Hong beside me, his hand finding Nut's in the familiar gesture of their quiet love. The chaos of backstage swirling around us, other families and other stories and other moments of triumph and exhaustion. And me—standing in the middle of it, camera in hand, no longer trying to capture something I didn't have but documenting something I was already part of.

This was the foundation Tui had been talking about all those months ago. The solid ground. I wasn't standing on William anymore. I wasn't reaching for storms. I wasn't waiting for someone else to see me so I could believe I existed. I was standing on this. On us. On the ordinary miracle of people who chose each other.

The evening wound down slowly. Eventually, Lego had to change—get out of the costume, ice his knee, let his body start to recover from what he'd put it through. The group dispersed temporarily, everyone finding their way to different corners of the venue, giving space where space was needed. I found myself outside, in the courtyard between the performance hall and the main university building. The night air was cool, Bangkok's evening settling into its rhythm of distant traffic and muffled music and the particular hum of a city that never quite slept.

My camera hung around my neck. My memory card was full of moments I would never forget.

I thought about the performance. About Lego's body telling a story that words couldn't capture. About the way he'd collapsed and risen, collapsed and risen, showing the audience what it meant to survive something that should have destroyed you.

I thought about Tui's face when Lego had first appeared on stage. The terror and pride and love all tangled together. The way he'd watched like he was witnessing something sacred.

I thought about Hong, crying sympathetic tears in the audience, his own day of vulnerability still fresh. About Nut beside him, steady and present, that quiet love language of simply showing up.

And I thought about myself. A year ago, I would have watched this night from the outside. Would have felt the ache of not having what they had—the relationships, the love, the being chosen. Would have catalogued my own loneliness while surrounded by other people's joy.

But tonight, I had been part of it. Not a witness from outside but a participant from within. I had held Lego's hand backstage. Had captured moments that would matter to people I loved. Had stood in the audience and felt my own tears fall, not from envy but from the particular fullness of caring about someone and watching them succeed.

That was the shift therapy had given me. What Dr. Siriporn had helped me understand. That being seen wasn't just about having someone else's eyes on you—it was about learning to see yourself. And once you could do that, you could start to see others. Really see them. With attention and care and the willingness to preserve what you witnessed.

My camera wasn't a shield anymore. It was a love letter. Every photo I took said: I was paying attention. You mattered. I wanted to remember. The door behind me opened, and I turned to see Tui stepping out into the courtyard.—the particular exhaustion of an emotionally draining evening visible in the set of his shoulders. He spotted me and walked over, settling onto the bench beside me.

We sat in silence for a moment, looking up at the stars that were barely visible through Bangkok's light pollution.

"How is he?" I asked finally.

"Icing his knee. Hong's with him." Tui's voice was soft. "He's okay. Exhausted, but okay."

"And you?"

Tui laughed—a small sound, almost surprised. "I don't know. I've never—" He stopped. Tried again. "I've never felt like this about anyone. Not like this."

"I know." I looked at him—my oldest friend, the person who had been my anchor through the worst of my own storm. "I could see it. Tonight, backstage. The way you look at him."

"Is it that obvious?"

"To someone who's paying attention."

He was quiet for a moment, processing. Then: "I was scared, you know. For so long. Because he's young, and I'm—" He gestured vaguely at himself. "Damaged. I have baggage. I didn't want to put that on him."

"He has baggage too," I said gently. "Everyone does. That's not a reason not to love someone."

"That's what he said." Tui smiled, something soft and new in his expression.

"Tonight, backstage. Before he went on. He said—" He stopped, shook his head. "It doesn't matter what he said. What matters is I finally stopped pretending. I finally let him see what I was feeling."

"And?"

"And he already knew." The wonder in his voice was unmistakable. "He'd been waiting for me to catch up."

I thought about that—about all the time Tui had spent protecting his own heart while Lego watched and waited. About the patience it must have taken. About the particular kind of love that didn't demand but simply existed, steady and present, until the other person was ready to receive it.

"He's strong," I said. "Stronger than he looks."

"I know. That's what makes me—" Tui's voice caught. "That's what makes me scared, Est. Because he's so strong that he forgets he's allowed to be weak. He carries everything alone because he doesn't believe anyone will stay if they see the real weight of it."

"But you're staying."

"I'm staying." The words came out like a vow. "For however long he'll let me. I'm not going anywhere."

We sat in the quiet together, two friends who had known each other through so much—through scholarships and struggles, through my obsession with William and my long road back from it, through all the complicated work of becoming people we could respect.

"You know," I said finally, "this is the first time I've seen you like this. In love, I mean. Really in love."

Tui looked at me. "Does it show?"

"Everything shows. When you're paying attention." I smiled at him. "It looks good on you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." I looked up at the barely-visible stars, at the night sky that held all our stories whether we could see them or not. "You deserve this, Tui. Both of you do. Someone who sees all of it and stays anyway."

"So do you," he said quietly. "You know that, right? You deserve that too."

The words landed in my chest—not with the desperate ache I would have felt a year ago, but with something gentler. Acknowledgment. Acceptance. The beginning of believing something I hadn't been able to believe before.

"I'm learning," I said. "I'm not there yet. But I'm learning."

"That's all any of us are doing." Tui reached over and squeezed my shoulder, that familiar gesture of solidarity. "Learning. Trying. Showing up for each other while we figure it out."

The door opened again. This time it was Lego, changed out of his costume into comfortable clothes, a fresh ice pack strapped to his knee. Hong and Nut were with him, and they all made their way toward us in the courtyard. Lego's face lit up when he spotted Tui—that particular brightness that wasn't performance anymore but simply joy. He crossed to the bench and settled beside Tui, fitting into the curve of his body like a puzzle piece finding its place.

"What are you two doing out here?" he asked. "Being philosophical?"

"Something like that." I said.

"Boring." But Lego was smiling, his whole face alight with something that looked like peace. "Let's get food. I'm starving and I just burned approximately a thousand calories performing my grief for strangers."

"The way you phrase things," Hong said, shaking his head. But he was smiling too.

We gathered ourselves—five people who had started as separate and damaged, slowly learning to be connected and healing. The night was warm despite the late hour. The city hummed around us. And somewhere in the distance, other people were living their own stories, their own moments of triumph and vulnerability.

But this moment was ours. I looked at my friends—at Lego leaning into Tui's side, at Hong and Nut standing close together, at the web of care and attention we'd woven between us—and felt the particular fullness of belonging.

Not because we were perfect. Not because everything was fixed. Not because any of us had finished healing.

But because we showed up. Because we saw each other. Because we'd built something real in the wreckage of what our biological families had failed to provide.

I raised my camera one more time.

"Group photo," I said. "For the record."

Everyone groaned—the performative reluctance of people who secretly wanted to

be documented. But they gathered anyway, arranging themselves in front of me, Tui's arm around Lego, Hong and Nut pressed close together, everyone's faces showing the particular exhaustion and joy of a day well lived.

I set the timer and ran to join them, sliding into the frame just as the shutter clicked.

The photo would be imperfect. Slightly blurry. Everyone caught mid-laugh or mid-complaint. Not the polished image that would go on any professional portfolio.

But it would be true.

And that was all that mattered.